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ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF LESBIANISM IN A GENERAL COURSE ON WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE AGES



I TAUGHT "Women in the Middle Ages" as an advanced seminar, available for credit towards an undergraduate minor or a graduate concentration in Women's Studies. The course was divided into three sections: love, marriage, and divorce; women in the Church; and witchcraft and heresy. I decided to address the question of homosexuality most directly in the context of the third section, although naturally it also came up during the other two parts of the course.

Finding materials, especially materials accessible to students without foreign language skills or background in medieval studies, was the biggest problem. I finally decided to use Judith Brown's book, Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy (Oxford, 1986). Even though it is not about the Middle Ages, it does offer some historical background about medieval attitudes toward homoerotic relations between women, citing literary texts, legal codes, and other evidence; and it provides a text from which to raise the whole question of how to define "lesbianism" in the context of medieval society, what to look for in the historical record, and so on. In addition, I recommended that students read two articles by E. Ann Matter: "My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 2 (1986): 81-93; and "Discourses of Desire: Sexuality and Christian Women's Visionary Narratives," Journal of Homosexuality 18 (1989): 119-31. Earlier in the semester, during a unit on convent life, I had already distributed a selection of love letters taken from Peter Dronke's Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love Lyric (Oxford, 1968), including both letters from women to men and letters from women to other women.

I began the unit on homosexuality by asking the students to think about what the term

“lesbian” means. I explained Adrienne Rich’s notion of the “lesbian continuum” (*Signs* 1980) as well as the responses and critiques of this notion offered by Anne Ferguson et al. (*Signs* 1981). We discussed the question of whether or not medieval culture offered a woman the possibility of making a conscious choice about sexual orientation, which would then form a basis for her sense of identity; whether or not medieval society would have allowed for the formation of a lesbian subculture in any sense of the word; and what we might look for in the literary and historical record in order to answer these questions. The students readily accepted the idea that “lesbianism” can cover a fairly wide range of sexual and emotional possibilities. At first, they resisted the idea that the categories of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality,” as bases for personal identity, might not have existed in medieval culture. Eventually, however, they began to accept that such categories are, at least to a certain extent, culturally constructed.

In examining the materials, various ideas emerged which allowed for fruitful discussion. Some students wondered whether relationships between nuns could be considered “lesbian” when the women were explicitly married to a masculine God and committed to an ideology that oppressed women. Others, however, argued that entering a convent enabled a medieval woman to avoid marriage and to spend her life in a community of women; as such, it might have attracted women who, in the context of modern society, would identify as lesbian. Most felt that one might fruitfully look to the Beguine movement in a search for woman-identified women, and several students took this idea up in their papers, using the writings of Hadewijch (available in English translation). The class also considered the possibility that since concepts of sexuality were overwhelmingly phallogocentric, romantic and erotic relations between women may simply not have been categorized as “sex,” but rather as friendship. Moreover, even non-erotic friendship might have allowed for some degree of physical intimacy as well as considerable emotional intensity. In addressing this last question, we drew on Angelica Reiger’s article, “Was Bieris de Romans Lesbian? Women’s Relation with Each Other in the World of the Troubadours,” in W. Paden, ed. *The Voice of the Troubadour*, 73-94.

I cannot claim that any conclusive answers emerged from our discussions, but the experience was rewarding for both me and the students. Aside from the obvious importance and interest in attempting to construct a lesbian herstory, the class was introduced to methodological and conceptual problems inherent in the study of other cultures and other times. From this initial experience I feel encouraged to pursue the questions raised in my own research, and look forward to future opportunities to explore them in the classroom.

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CHAUCER’S LESBIANS: DRAWING BLANKS?

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CHAUCER’S PARSON openly refers to male and female homosexuality, justifying his candor with Scriptural precedent.¹ More typically, however, Chaucer veils his indication of homo- or bisexuality. The Pardoner’s eunuchry, the Summoner’s “stif burdoun,” Absolon’s unintended revenge upon Nicholas, for instance, suggest but do not name their